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## **Why Are We Still Talking About the Visegrad Group? Hungary's Proposal for Expanding Central European Cooperation**

**The Visegrad Group summit scheduled for 23 June 2026 in Budapest may mark the beginning of a new debate on the future of regional cooperation in Central Europe. While Hungarian Prime Minister Péter Magyar has announced plans to revive cooperation within V4, he has simultaneously proposed expanding the framework to include Austria, Croatia, Romania, Slovenia and possibly Germany. Although the proposal is primarily pragmatic in nature and reflects a search for more effective mechanisms for pursuing shared political, economic and security interests, the very discussion surrounding it demonstrates that, despite the crises of recent years, the Visegrad Group remains an important reference point for thinking about regional cooperation in Central Europe.**

The Visegrad Group summit scheduled for 23 June 2026 in Budapest may prove one of the most significant events for regional cooperation in Central Europe since the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Hungarian Prime Minister Péter Magyar has presented the summit as the beginning of a revival of the V4, a format that has lost much of its political momentum in recent years. Importantly, Magyar's vision goes beyond restoring cooperation among the group's current members. He has also proposed the creation of a broader platform that would include Austria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia. As a result, the debate surrounding the Budapest summit extends beyond the future of the V4 itself and raises broader questions about new forms of political cooperation in Central Europe.

**The Visegrad Group after the Change of Government in Hungary.** One of the priorities of Péter Magyar's foreign policy has been to rebuild relations with regional partners that deteriorated during the final years of Viktor Orbán's government because of disagreements over Russia's war against Ukraine and Budapest's foreign policy orientation. In this context, the Hungarian prime minister has announced a renewed commitment to Visegrad cooperation, accompanied by a series of meetings with regional leaders and discussions on the possible enlargement of the format. However, the proposal to involve Croatia, Austria, Slovenia, Romania, and Germany should not be interpreted as an attempt to create a new Central European political community. Magyar's statements have focused primarily on practical objectives: increasing the region's influence within the European Union, improving the representation of shared interests, strengthening infrastructure links, enhancing energy security and deepening economic cooperation. From this perspective, a broader format would primarily serve to increase the political and economic weight of regional cooperation.

**Expansion Rather than Restoration.** The Hungarian prime minister's proposal suggests that Hungary is not seeking a simple return to the pre-2022 model of V4 cooperation. Both the international environment and the position of individual states in the region have changed significantly. Russia's war against Ukraine, emerging security challenges, and the growing importance of energy policy have made it clear that traditional mechanisms of cooperation must be adapted to new realities. In this context, expanding cooperation to include additional countries could strengthen the region's influence within European Union decision-making processes. Austria would contribute economic strength and political experience, Romania would bring geopolitical significance linked to the Black Sea region, while Croatia and Slovenia would reinforce the southern dimension of Central European cooperation and strengthen connections with the Adriatic area.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that the further development of cooperation within the V4+ framework appears more likely than the formal enlargement of the Visegrad Group itself. Previous experience has

demonstrated that flexible formats of cooperation are often better suited to addressing the changing political and economic needs of the countries in the region.

**Croatia as a Natural Partner.** Among the countries mentioned by Péter Magyar, Croatia deserves particular attention. This is not coincidental. For many years, Croatia has participated in V4+ initiatives, cooperating with the Visegrad countries in areas such as infrastructure development, energy policy, EU cohesion policy, and the enlargement of the European Union. From a political perspective, Croatia is also an attractive partner due to its geographical location, membership in both the eurozone and the Schengen Area, and its growing role in infrastructure projects linking Central Europe with the Adriatic Sea. At the same time, Croatia remains an active participant in other regional initiatives, including the Three Seas Initiative, making it an important link connecting various frameworks of regional cooperation. For this reason, any further strengthening of relations between Croatia and the V4 countries should be viewed primarily as an element of pragmatic regional cooperation rather than as a sign of a fundamental restructuring of Central Europe's existing institutional architecture.

**The V4 as an Element of Central Europe's Symbolic Geography.** The most interesting aspect of the current debate, however, is the choice of reference point itself for the proposed changes. Péter Magyar did not propose creating a new regional organisation or establishing a separate framework for cooperation. Instead, he chose to refer to the existing Visegrad Group. Paradoxically, this fact itself demonstrates the enduring strength of the V4 as a political brand. Despite the numerous crises and disputes that have weakened the effectiveness of Visegrad cooperation in recent years, the format remains the most recognisable symbol of Central Europe. Over more than three decades, the V4 has established a position that no other regional initiative has been able to achieve. Unlike the Three Seas Initiative, which focuses primarily on infrastructure, energy, and economic projects, the Visegrad Group also possesses a significant political and symbolic dimension. For many European observers, it has become synonymous with Central European cooperation, while for the countries in the region it remains a natural reference point in debates about the future of regional cooperation.

The resilience of the Visegrad Group stems not only from its institutional achievements but also from the place it occupies in the way Central Europe is imagined and understood. For more than three decades, the V4 has helped shape the perception of the region as a distinct political space with its own interests, historical experiences, and objectives within the framework of European integration.

From this perspective, the Visegrad Group is more than merely a mechanism of intergovernmental cooperation. It constitutes an element of Central Europe's symbolic geography—a mental map that structures the way the region is perceived both by its inhabitants and by external partners. This is precisely why discussions about the future of regional cooperation continue to revolve around the V4, even though other frameworks of cooperation are playing an increasingly important role in practice.

**Conclusions.** The debate triggered by Péter Magyar's proposal demonstrates that regional cooperation in Central Europe is entering a new phase. The issue is no longer simply preserving existing frameworks but rather identifying mechanisms of cooperation that will enable the countries in the region to respond more effectively to changing political, economic, and security conditions. In this context, flexible networks of cooperation linking countries with similar interests in specific policy areas are becoming increasingly important.

At the same time, the debate on the future of the V4 reveals an interesting paradox. In recent years, the Visegrad Group has lost some of its capacity to formulate common positions, yet it has not lost its significance as a reference point for thinking about Central Europe. None of the alternative frameworks of regional cooperation has so far managed to assume this role, even though some of them possess greater economic potential or a broader geographical reach.

In this sense, the V4 currently operates on two levels simultaneously. On the one hand, it is an instrument of intergovernmental cooperation whose effectiveness fluctuates with changing political circumstances. On the other hand, it remains a lasting symbol of Central Europe, deeply embedded in the region's political imagination. It is this latter function that may ultimately prove decisive for the future of the format. While specific

configurations of cooperation are likely to evolve, the need to define Central Europe as a distinct space of political cooperation will probably remain a permanent feature of regional politics.

Regardless of whether the Hungarian prime minister's proposals are ultimately implemented, the very idea of expanding cooperation around the V4 testifies to the enduring political and symbolic appeal of this format.